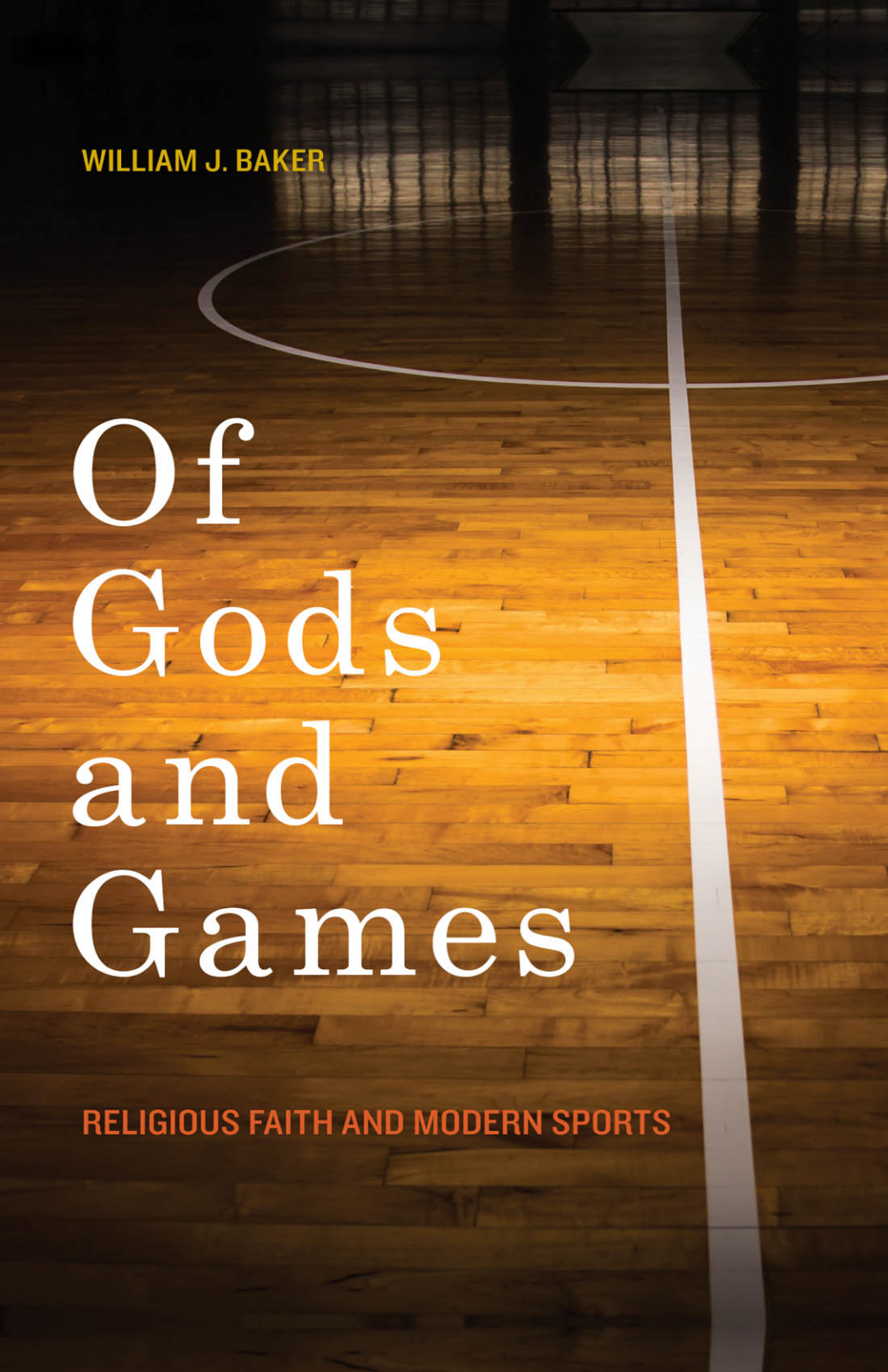
WILLIAM J. BAKER
Of Gods and Games
RELIGIOUS FAITH AND MODERN SPORTS

VISIT…

Of Gods and Games

George H. Shriver Lecture Series
in Religion in American History
No. 7

Of Gods and Games

Religious Faith and Modern Sport

WILLIAM J. BAKER

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Preface

At Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in the early 1960s, I enjoyed many hours of historical study under the supervision of a bright young scholar, George H. Shriver, the creator of this lecture series. On the old Wake Forest campus, Shriver applied his newly minted Duke doctorate to the task of preparing theology students for various forms of religious ministry. Barely older than most of his students, he was fresh and bold, informed and inspiring.

Surrounded by colleagues liberally inclined, Shriver represented the promise of a bright new day for Southern Baptists eager to dispense with outdated racial and theological assumptions. Students gathered round, hungrily imbibing an infectious optimism voiced years earlier by a youthful William Wordsworth in the era of revolutionary Europe: "Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive, but to be young was very heaven."

Like Wordsworth, we lived to see our dreams mangled by reactionary forces wed to traditional structures of thought and institutional self-interest. At Wake Forest seminary, older Baptist commitments to biblical inerrancy, puritanical behavior, and revivalist clichés won the day. Frustrated, some of us sought different (if not greener) pastures. In addition to a

kind of Wordsworthian nostalgia, we often cited a legendary line from the closer-at-hand Korean War. Accused of retreating from battle against hordes of Chinese troops at the Chosin Reservoir, a Marine Corps commander reportedly replied, "Retreat, hell! We're not retreating. We're just attacking in a different direction."

These Shriver lectures might best be viewed as attacks in directions different from the usual concerns of religious history. They focus on people and their disparate passions, not merely on preachers, priests, popes, and philosophers. They deal with the losers as well as the winners in ecclesiastical conflicts, dissent as well as orthodoxy in ideological controversies. Best of all, they attend to issues heretofore largely ignored by historians of religious history.

Of Gods and Games

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Prologue

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Until quite recently, the historic interaction of religious faith and sports stood near the top of the list of topics unattended by historians. In the early 1960s, we mindlessly assumed a cozy integration of church and sport, the two activities that dominated our youthful experience. We played on church softball and basketball teams. With championship trophies and press clippings in hand, many of us came to seminary seasoned in high school and college athletics. Faculty colleagues played tennis and bowled competitively, we were told. We students migrated to the campus gym for freelance basketball and to a decrepit old football stadium (vacated a few years earlier by the Demon Deacons when the college moved to Winston-Salem) for spirited touch football games.

Yet no literature provided us information on the roots and contextual factors that shaped our experience. Without historical perspective, we could scarcely articulate the various shades of meaning embedded in this modern merger of religion and sport.

Classic theology offered little assistance. No ball fields were to be found in Augustine's *City of God*, nor did Calvin's prohibitions against Sunday play and sport-focused gambling produce anything more than crabby Christians. Schleiermacher's definition of religious faith as a "sense of absolute dependence" on God

is scarcely an athlete's credo; Kierkegaard's fear and trembling certainly pertained to something other than pregame jitters. Five big *b*s in Buber, Bultmann, Barth, Brunner, and Bonhoeffer buzzed noisily down our Protestant lanes, contested only by the ever-present N-word: the brothers Niebuhr—Reinhold and H. Richard. "Thou shalt love the Lord thy Dodd (a then-fashionable British New Testament scholar) with thy whole Barth," we joked, "and thy Niebuhr as thyself."

Perhaps we should have taken the theology of Paul Tillich more seriously, especially his insistence that in one's "ultimate concern" lies the essence of religious faith. Had we gone that route, we might well have realized that the inordinate amount of attention, time, and money we expended on sport bordered on a kind of idolatry. That perspective would have prompted us to jump the gun on the sociologists who stood poised to observe that American sport was fast becoming a new civic religion. On behalf of this new god, traditional religious rituals and passions were reinvented. As church attendance faltered, crowds filed eagerly into massive new stadiums and indoor arenas; as religious zeal waned, partisan fans lived and died for the home team.

Today, not even terrorist threats prevent true believers from investing huge amounts of time, sums of money, and emotional commitment to sport. In response to the devastating injuries and deaths caused by sidewalk bombs at the Boston Marathon in 2014, the motto of "Boston Strong" became a battle cry for

survival. It is a standard that owes much more to the Red Sox, the Patriots, and the Celtics than it does to the Puritans and Transcendentalists of old.

So, where were the whistle-blowers on this latest form of idolatry? Well, truth to tell, they came not from religious quarters. The prophets went to sleep at the wheel, and so did the evangelists. Billy Graham and his revivalist cohorts never met a celebrity athlete whose heartfelt Christian testimony they could not use to attract others to Jesus.

Beyond that functional, propagandistic use of athletes, however, Graham had little to show for his youthful enthusiasm for baseball or his more recent golf games with Richard Nixon. To their credit, some pastors in the 1960s dealt critically with issues regarding race and war; to their discredit, they had not the eyes to see the idolatrous tendencies in modern sport.

As religious ministers, academics, and journalists remained largely silent on the sidelines, athletes themselves sounded the alarm that American sport might be something less than wonderful. In 1968 Jerry Kramer, an offensive guard for Vince Lombardi's Green Bay Packers, published a diary he kept when the Packers were on their way to an NFL championship. Kramer's *Instant Replay* (1968) quickly became an oft-quoted success, a candid but benign insider's view of America's budding love affair with professional football.

Nor was the nation's older infatuation, major league baseball, immune to a diary-keeping athlete willing to expose the dirty jockstraps worn by would-be gods. Just two years after *Instant Replay*, pitcher Jim Bouton's *Ball Four* (1970) opened the locker room door for all to look inside. Readers were simply stunned by the promiscuous intentions, petty habits, lewd language, and trivial preoccupations of everyone from a lowly second-stringer to the highest and mightiest New York Yankee, Mickey Mantle. The gods had clay feet—and clay hands, eyes, and ears as well.

"Say it ain't so, Jim," the commissioner of baseball, Bowie Kuhn, demanded in so many words. "How dare you rob American youths of their heroes and idols. Is nothing sacred?"

"Well, now that you mention it," replied Bouton in so many other words, "try honesty, candor, or whatever you wish to call it." His own sense of candor produced a turn of phrase appropriate to the complex attraction of sport. "You spend your life gripping a baseball," Bouton concluded, "and it turns out that it was the other way around all along." Through the door opened by Bouton and Kramer, several angry bulls came charging into the room in the early 1970s. Most came from the gridiron. Sweaty and agitated, all came spinning off from the antiwar era seething with impatience toward the bromides that rationalized the injuries, authoritarian coaches, and economic systems thriving on the exploitation of athletes.

Dave Meggyesy, a former linebacker at Syracuse University and then for seven years with the NFL St. Louis Cardinals, led

the charge. His hard-hitting *Out of Their League* (1970) inspired other athletes to tell the truth as they saw it. In a vivid crescendo of idol-smashing fervor, Gary Shaw's *Meat on the Hoof* (1972) and Lance Rentzel's *When All the Laughter Died in Sorrow* (1972) set the stage for the biggest bombshell of all: Peter Gent's *North Dallas Forty* (1973).

This lightly fictionalized account of Gent's life as a Dallas Cowboy made Kramer's *Instant Replay* seem much too tame if not downright misleading. Critics especially noticed Gent's jaundiced depiction of a pious, hypocritical coach who looked and talked like the Cowboys' head coach, Tom Landry; a hell-raising, fun-loving quarterback brought the recently retired Don Meredith to mind. Throughout *North Dallas Forty*, athletes are broken in body and spirit, addicted to alcohol and lethal drugs, and absorbed in sexual escapades. For the film version, a ruggedly handsome former college tight end, Nick Nolte, played the leading role.

Hitting the cinema circuit in 1979, the film candidly portrayed the brutal, cynical backside of the gridiron game. Several reviewers noted an obvious religious implication. "In a society in which major league sports events have replaced Sunday worship as the religion of choice," wrote one critic, "*North Dallas Forty* appears like a desecration of the altar."

History cannot tolerate too many desecrations of tradition, it seems. This dismissal of religion-tinged sport caused a backlash: a reaffirmation of the productive union of religious faith and

the sports arena. In 1976 a conservative Catholic philosopher, theologian, and journalist, Michael Novak, produced a decidedly favorable account, *The Joy of Sports: Endzones, Bases, Baskets, Balls, and the Consecration of the American Spirit*. In Novak's view, sport and religion shared similar tendencies toward discipline, passionate effort, and liturgical cadence. Echoing earlier Protestant and muscular Christian rationales, Novak insisted that sports taught "religious qualities of heart and soul" by creating symbolic exhibitions of cosmic struggles for human survival and moral courage.

Steering clear of this sort of idealistic conjecture, an American studies scholar, Allen Guttmann, placed himself at the forefront of sports studies with his demand for a more factual, analytical appraisal of modern sport. Just two years after Novak's *Joy of Sports* hit the book stalls, Guttmann's *From Ritual to Record: The Nature of Modern Sport* (1978) brought an impressive grasp of sociology and anthropology as well as history and literature to the service of sports studies. For Guttmann, "modern" sport largely began in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries with features fundamentally different from any earlier expression of athleticism.

Guttmann's very first point of comparison pertains to humanity's oldest concern, religion. Modern sport, says Guttmann, is a secular, not a sacred enterprise. Today's athletes might well pray before games and then point to the heavens after a home run, touchdown, or knockout, but these pious gestures are all mere

tokens of belief that are noteworthy because they are so extravagant. Modern athletic contests are staged not to honor the gods but rather as monuments to intercollegiate and civic ambition, capitalist investment, and nationalistic pride. From that premise flows all the other distinguishing characteristics of modern sport: its codified rules, bureaucratic organization, mania for quantification, and quest for records.

Heady stuff, this, requiring more time and mental tenacity than most people enjoy. For the American turn from the controversial dark days of the 1970s to a more upbeat treatment of the connection between religion and sport, one might best consider the enthusiastic response to *Chariots of Fire,* an award-winning film in the early 1980s. Despite its memorable musical score and colorful scenes, *Chariots of Fire* was an unlikely candidate for American stardom. It was a British production without any big-name stars. Ian Charleston (playing Eric Liddell), Ben Cross (Harold Abrahams), and even the veteran Shakespearean actor Ian Holmes (whose depiction of professional coach Sam Mussabini won an Oscar nomination) lacked name recognition with Americans. Worse still, *Chariots*'s competitive running lacked game recognition in the United States, where track events are more often than not marginalized.

When *Chariots* wheeled onto the American scene in 1981, Ronald Reagan was just bringing his conservative agenda to the

fore. As liberal critics noted, *Chariots of Fire* was a period piece, arguably a welcomed dose of nostalgia for white Americans. Although African American athletes were becoming increasingly dominant in the real-life 1980s, no black athletes are to be found in this fictionalized account of two British runners in the 1924 Paris Olympics.

But *Chariots of Fire* is much more than a barometer of time-warped racial attitudes. It is an attractive, strong reassertion of the primacy of religious faith as a motivating factor in human affairs. The phrase "chariots of fire" comes right out of the Old Testament (2 Kings 2:11), was adapted by British poet William Blake for his poem "And Did Those Feet in Ancient Time" (also known as "Jerusalem") in 1808, and in 1916 was used by Sir Hubert Parry to name a piece of music. The movie begins and ends with a rousing version of "Jerusalem" that has by now virtually become Britain's national anthem, including the phrase, "And did those feet in ancient time / walk upon England's mountain green."

On Scotland's mountain green, Eric Liddell, a devout son of Scottish missionaries in China, learned to run for the glory of God. "I believe God made me for a purpose," he explains to a pious sister who thinks his athleticism frivolous, "but he also made me fast. And when I run, I feel his pleasure." Liddell's Olympic opponent, Harold Abrahams, was Jewish. He ran for ethnic pride, not so much for any personalized pleasure. An Olympic medal would shield him against anti-Semitic bigotry, he believed, especially at his WASPish Cambridge University.

The Liddell character stole the show, of course. In a pivotal scene, he confronts British Olympic officials (including the Prince of Wales) with his decision not to compete as scheduled on Sunday. In his home, Liddell stubbornly explained, he had been taught to honor the Christian Sabbath by keeping it free of worldly distractions. Had reviewers been more conversant with social history, they might have recognized the irony in this passionate defense of an old Puritan practice that was fast becoming obsolete everywhere except in the parochial corners of Scotland and China.

The greater irony is that *Chariots of Fire* originated in Britain, the land of many historic steeples and spires but pitifully few people in the pews, rather than in the United States, where churchgoing is still a popular enterprise. Ironic or not, *Chariots of Fire* appealed to many of those same moviegoers who applauded *North Dallas Forty* just four years earlier. Nominated for seven Oscars, *Chariots* carried off four, including the award for best picture. It stands as an iconic moment in the age-old connection between gods and games.

As an attempt to make sense of both the benefits and the negatives embedded in this connection, chapter 1, "Playing the God Game," considers two Christian athletes who are similarly zealous but fundamentally different in terms of athletic and religious engagement. Chapter 2, "Beyond the Scoreboard," turns the spotlight onto coaches who attempt to honor their faith amid personal needs as well as professional demands. Finally, chapter 3,

"Scribes and Sportscasters," charts some journalists' faith-based achievements that range from charitable deeds to religious poetry.

CHAPTER 1

Playing the God Game

A Tale of Two Christian Athletes

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For this kickoff section, we set our sights on two Christian athletes who represent distinctive paths to the present. One is female, a Catholic by birth, family values, and education. She achieved stardom in the basketball heavens and then committed herself to private religious devotion rather than the publicity that came of athletic fame. She represents a long Catholic tradition stretching from medieval folk games to today's organized sports, a tradition in which local priests and ecclesiastical hierarchies largely agreed on the worthwhile character of athletic activity, for women as well as men.

Her counterpart presents quite a different profile: a male athlete who is also an earnest Protestant. His exploits on and off the gridiron made him anything but private in his devotional activities. Not long ago, his ideological mindset might well have caused locker room doors to be shut in his face even if he deigned to seek admission. Today his blend of athleticism and evangelism seems to be the norm rather than the exception at athletic events.

Speaking of norms, here at the outset we need to dispense with the fanciful conjecture that Jesus or any of his apostles might have taken kindly to sports. For them, sports meant the gladiator's arena, unsafe territory for Christians and other criminals;

or it meant weeklong athletic festivals periodically held in honor of one of the pagan gods. King Zeus, not King Jesus, stood astride the Olympics. No women were allowed; male athletes and spectators alike appeared in the nude. It was no place for a good Jewish boy unless he wanted to display his circumcision.

Without firsthand knowledge, the apostle Paul nonetheless invoked Greek athletics as a metaphor for the spiritual race to be run for an incorruptible prize. Strenuous effort and a strong faith lived comfortably together in Paul's scheme of things. As he put it to Timothy, "I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith." In Paul's hands, mandate was delivered in metaphor. Christians, he insisted, should "run with patience the race that is set before [them]."

Most certainly can this be said of the two athletes to whom I invite your attention in this chapter. They ran with patience the race that was set before them. It is my pleasant duty to document both the athletic skills and the internal motivations that drove them to excel on their various fields of play.

First, consider Shelly Pennefather, a superb basketball player whose athletic excellence has largely been obscured by time and circumstance. Shelly grew up a military brat in Colorado and upstate New York, where her father moved under orders from the air force. Frequently uprooted (sixteen times in twenty-eight years), the family of nine found stability in

two disparate parts of their lives: their Catholic faith and high school athletics.

Several Pennefather siblings took eagerly to basketball. Four played the game at Division I level in college. As girls mixed it up with boys in rough backyard scrimmages, Shelly's large frame proved to be ideal for the game. She topped out at only six feet, one inch tall, but that was big enough for a sturdy woman to wield dominance around the basket in the 1980s. Better still, her father pushed her to perfect a jump shot that was both accurate and graceful. Reporters dubbed her "the Larry Bird of women's basketball." Most impressive of all, she never once played a losing game in high school.

Little wonder that some two hundred colleges and universities beat paths to her door with basketball scholarship offers in hand. This attention largely derived from the recent (1972) passage of Title IX's requirement that government funds be distributed equally to male and female recipients. Friends assumed that Shelly would accept an offer from Providence College, a good Catholic (Dominican) institution where an older brother had played under the watchful eye of an eager young Rick Pitino. Instead, she chose Villanova, a Jesuit school, largely because her interview with Coach Harry Perretta went so well.

Early in their conversation, Perretta sensed Shelly's serious religious bent. He quickly learned that the Pennefather household left no prayer unsaid, no rosary unstroked, and no religious holiday uncelebrated. The coach and his recruit discussed

basketball strategies and tactics. They talked more, though, about the place of prayer in an athlete's life and about the Virgin Mary medal that Shelly wore on the basketball court. As Perretta later recalled in a memorable understatement, "We had an unusual conversation."

Thus did Shelly Pennefather launch a spectacular hoops career at Villanova. For three consecutive years she won the Big East Player of the Year award; in 1987 she received the Wade Trophy as the women's national player of the year. By her career's end, she had scored more than twenty-four hundred points, Villanova's all-time best. Many of her twenty-one scoring and rebounding records still stand.

Unfortunately, no women's professional league existed to welcome women like Shelley Pennefather onto the play-for-pay circuit. As the full effect of Title IX had not yet been felt, women's professional leagues rose and fell frequently in the 1970s and 1980s, leaving Pennefather's generation to look overseas for the continuation of their athletic careers. Unlikely as it sounds, Shelly turned to Japan and for three years led the Nippon Express in a Japanese professional league. She made $100,000 per year; by 1991 her agent was negotiating a new contract at twice that amount.

Then the Hound of Heaven intervened. Each summer Shelly kept contact with her American family and friends by working in a soup kitchen in Norristown, Pennsylvania. There she met Mother Teresa, whose influence prompted Shelly to reexamine

her priorities. By the end of 1991 she became a novice in the Poor Clare cloistered community at the end of a quiet cul-de-sac in a modest suburban neighborhood in Alexandria, Virginia.

One of the most austere orders in the Catholic Church, the Poor Clares sleep on a bed of straw less than four hours at a time. They eat only one full meal a day. Except for a few minutes each day in the courtyard, they do not converse with each other. Telephones, computers, radios, and television are forbidden; so are all books and magazines except for religious periodicals. Cell phones and text messages certainly have no place within the walls of a Poor Clare convent.

Pennefather's earlier athletic discipline served her well in her new life as Sister Rose Marie. To bed by 8:30 each evening, she awoke shortly after midnight to matins bells for two hours of prayer. Back to sleep until 5:00 a.m., by dawn's early light she embarked on a morning of housekeeping chores punctuated with more prayers and readings from the Psalms. A light lunch of soup, bread, vegetables, and fruit sent her into an afternoon of yet more meditation that meshed with evening vespers before she returned to her straw mattress to repeat her monastic routine.

Proud of her commitment, parents and siblings nonetheless lamented her absence from their lives. They struggled to rationalize her decision to be a nun. "If you really believe faith is the under-force of every day that has great value," reasoned one brother, "you build up the spiritual phase first and foremost. If you don't have a spiritual base, you've got nothing."

Friends and former teammates were simply baffled. "Why are you doing that?" asked an old Villanova teammate. "I'm glad you are becoming a nun. But there are so many opportunities out there to teach and coach and influence kids' lives." At face value, Pennefather's answer was simple; in truth, it was anything but simple: "I would never choose this for myself. This is what I was called to do."

Who can argue with that?

Well, Tim Tebow for one. A football star, not a basketball worthy, Tebow is a Protestant, and a Baptist at that. His experience serves as a dramatic bookend to Shelly Pennefather's Catholicism.

To be inexact, Tim Tebow is a Southern Baptist. I consider this label inexact because—contrary to the biases of my Yankee friends—I know Southern Baptists to range from the brightest and best to the most ill-informed, from the most tolerant and liberal to the most parochial and racist. The term Southern Baptist is like the old sack dress that modest young women of my teenage years wore: It covered everything but touched nothing.

Tebow grew up in Jacksonville, Florida, but made several summer missionary trips to the Philippines, where his father was a Baptist missionary. Homeschooled by a devout mother, Tim first took to baseball and basketball, then to football. In 2005 he quarterbacked his Nease High School team to Florida's 4A State Championship. For his extraordinary effort, he was honored with

the Mr. Florida Football award. Within the next four years, at the University of Florida, he collected two national championship trophies; in 2007, he became the first sophomore ever to win the Heisman Trophy as the outstanding college player of the year.

Without doubt, he is the most prominent of all the many evangelical athletes who now point heavenward, drop to a knee in prayer, and praise their "blessed Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ" for a game won. This demonstrative, prayerful gesture has added a new term—"tebowing"—to our vocabulary, a term of derision more than one of admiration. Tebow is the most prominent of all the recent practitioners of Christian muscularity, but by no means is he the first one to do this sort of thing.

The use of sports as a platform for proselytizing began years ago. Prior to World War I, evangelist Billy Sunday, a former professional baseball player, mastered the art of sweetening the Gospel with sports. His pulpit performances featured physical as well as verbal gymnastics. He eagerly dramatized striking out the devil, then making a hook slide around the forces of evil to get safely home. He proudly admitted to placing the gospel jelly on the lowest possible shelf where everyone could reach it. For Billy Sunday, a baseball bat and glove sat right beside the jelly.

Shortly after World War II, an "unbroken" Olympic runner and recent prisoner of war, Louis Zamperini, appeared at a Billy Graham revival in Los Angeles to praise the redemptive power of Christ. By God's amazing grace, Zamperini insisted, he was learning to forgive even his abusive Japanese captors. God's

grace, he added, empowered him to break destructive habits and to engage in decent interactions with other people.

Right out of the Cold War in the 1950s marched an army of Christian athletic crusaders led by Gil Dodds, a record-breaking distance runner; Bob Richards, an Olympic pole-vaulter; and Donn Moomaw, an All-American linebacker at UCLA. Like Zamperini, all these men appeared on the podium at Billy Graham's early evangelistic campaigns telling how Jesus had transformed their lives. They were duly advertised as athletes speaking out for Christ, setting a pattern of celebrity endorsement that persists to this day.

What was good for the Protestant goose was also good for the Muslim gander. To the embarrassment of network moguls, in the early 1960s Muhammad Ali gave "all praise and honor" to Allah for Ali's early heavyweight championship victories. Microphone in hand, Howard Cosell had a tiger by the tail. The problem, according to Ali's critics, was that live postfight television interviews gave Ali an instant, captive audience. The real problem, of course, lay in the message conveyed: a religion alien to most Americans' belief system.

Protestant America, after all, was already shaping on-the-field behavior and postgame interviews on behalf of conservative Christian beliefs. Two major campus organizations, Campus Crusade for Christ and Youth for Christ, emerged as interdenominational efforts to spread the Gospel to a Cold War audience. Out of that evangelical soil sprang two groups specifically created

to appeal religiously to athletes: the Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA, founded in 1954) and Athletes in Action (AIA, 1966). Cut from the same cloth of many colors, these two groups catered to different audiences. The more inclusive of the two, the FCA, appealed mostly to football and baseball players. The AIA, conversely, focused largely on basketball athletes and events. Predictably, more African American and women athletes enrolled in the AIA.

What does this recent outburst of evangelical zeal have to do with Tim Tebow, and he with it? Everything. For the origins as well as the growth of his religious passion, a Protestant, conservative culture served him well. It all began in the home, where a hovering, stay-at-home mom took on the task of homeschooling with the dutiful support of a preacher-father. First off, they assumed the necessity of a child's decisive recognition of his "sinful" nature, followed by a contrite decision to give his heart and life to Jesus. Tebow cleared that hurdle at the tender age of six.

As he and coauthor Nathan Whitaker tell the story in a memoir, *Through My Eyes* (2011), young Tebow suffered all the guilt and fear common to the evangelical experience. Prior to his conversion, he morbidly worried that if he was in an automobile accident or if he drowned in a riptide on Jacksonville Beach, he might not go to heaven. Once converted, he knew he was "headed to heaven" because Christ forgives sin to "give you a home in heaven." References to a literal heaven bounce frequently in and

out of Tebow's reminiscences. When a beloved neighbor died, the Tebow family assured themselves that he simply "went to be with Jesus" and "was now enjoying the rewards of heaven."

Before they dispensed with diapers, Tebow's parents regularly read aloud from the books of Psalms and Proverbs during breakfast. Along with reading, writing, and arithmetic, they required all the young Tebows to memorize hefty passages from the Bible. Biblical references and quotations quickly became second nature to Tebow. During his sophomore year, Auburn upset the Gators 27–17, prompting a reporter to ask him how he would handle the loss. "In everything give thanks," Tebow replied without batting an eye, "for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus." That this scriptural passage (Thessalonians 5:18) was taken totally out of context apparently mattered little to the millions who shared Tebow's beliefs.

His most provocative display of biblical citations occurred in a big game against Alabama in 2009. In his glare-reducing under-eye smudge of black paint, Tebow used whitener to scribble "Phil." under one eye and "4:13" under the other. Asked to explain the reference, he happily quoted the biblical text: "Philippians 4:13: I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." Subsequent eye-black citations included John 3:16 and Ephesians 4:32. As something of a gauge for the nation's biblical ignorance, Google reportedly had ninety-four million inquiries about the meaning of John 3:16. Presumably those questions came not from evangelicals for whom John 3:16 is a favorite

verse—it reads, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life."

Another key portion of Tebow's evangelical vocabulary is the term "platform." Stardom puts the Christian athlete in the spotlight to witness to God's beneficence and Christ's saving power, especially if the television cameras are conveying the postgame interview to all the world. Athletes are peculiarly blessed, but for athletes and nonathletes alike, Tebow insisted, "God has given each of us a platform right where we are."

On Tebow's platform, a narrowly conservative evangelical theology embraced social and political measures espoused by Americans on the political right. During the Super Bowl in 2010, he and his mother, Pam, appeared in a thirty-second advertisement for a right-wing organization, Focus on the Family, claiming that Tim was a "miracle baby" who could well have been aborted. Pregnant, the mother had contracted amoebic dysentery, causing the doctors to fear a stillbirth. This brief clip made no mention of abortion (which was, in fact, illegal in the Philippines) or of anti-abortion Christian principles, but the message was clear.

So was Tim's response to a reporter's intrusive question about his sexual life. At a Southeastern Conference Media Day in 2009, a journalist noted that Tebow seemed to be wearing his religion on his sleeve. "Are you saving yourself for marriage?" he abruptly asked. "I am," Tebow announced. "I didn't shy away

from answering," he later explained, "because it's part of my platform, and it got a lot of people talking about it." In all fairness to Tebow, he claimed to believe that Christ wants men to relate to women "with respect, first and foremost."

Long before Tim Tebow, evangelical spokesmen promoted a commercial model for the spread of the Gospel. "If athletes can endorse products, why can't they endorse a way of life?" asked John Erickson shortly after he became head of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes in 1973. "Athletes and coaches, be it right or wrong, have a platform in this country. Athletes have power, a voice. So, simply, how can we best use this for something constructive in the faith life?"

A good question, that, whatever one's answer. How best can accomplished, highly visible athletes contribute "something constructive in the faith life"? To this question, Shelly Pennefather gave one answer; Tim Tebow demonstrated another. In all probability, none of us can uncritically accept either answer, a fact that requires each of us to work out our own salvation in a manner consistent with our unique experience and faith.

CHAPTER 2

Beyond the Scoreboard

Coaches Tackling Some Tough Issues

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Successful coaches, businessmen, and academics share several characteristics. All are driven by an intense work ethic. All thrive on the drama of the moment, especially in the waning seconds of the Big Game. And all tend to sacrifice emotional and familial needs on the altar of wealth, fame, or some other bitch goddess of the moment. Somewhere along the way, however, Willy Loman—a coach's whistle draped around his neck—becomes reflective, no longer able to avoid the abyss that is his past, present, and future.

In that chasm, press clippings fade and turn yellow, championship trophies ring hollow, and cheering crowds go silent. "When my life comes to an end," asks Ole Miss football coach Hugh Freeze, "how much does that scoreboard really matter?" The question is a good one, whatever one's religious beliefs. It is a question that most coaches everywhere—in high school, college, and professional sport, winners and losers alike—confront sooner or later in their attempt to gauge the intrinsic value of their choices in life.

Some coaches predictably find refuge in acts of religious devotion, including regular attendance at mass and church services of worship, generous financial support of religious institutions and

their programs, and adherence to written and unwritten rules of behavior as articulated by priests and ministers. A few, though, go beyond these rudimentary signs of commitment to affirm a very personal set of values, sometimes in opposition to the prevailing religious norms of the day. Several also look beyond the scoreboard to address some important social issues of the day.

Bill McCartney, head gridiron coach of the University of Colorado Buffaloes from 1982 to 1994, compiled an impressive record of 93–55–5 that included three consecutive Big Eight Conference championships and participation in several major bowl games. In 1990 the Associated Press selected the Buffaloes as the national champions of the college game. Yet McCartney could not rest content with the publicity and economic benefits that came from these achievements. An enthusiastic evangelical who used his public visibility as a platform from which to dispense the Gospel, he frequently reminded his audience that he was a born-again Christian.

Within the same year of Colorado's national championship, McCartney founded a conservative Christian organization, Promise Keepers. Promoting huge rallies in football stadiums throughout the United States, Promise Keepers extolled "spiritual, moral, ethical and sexual purity" in its adherents. These preachments were directed primarily to men, especially to straight, antigay men eager to reaffirm traditional gender roles

that had become frayed with misuse and feminist critiques. The greater the visibility of Promise Keepers, the greater the barrage of feminist opposition to its misogynistic message.

McCartney's message boiled down to faith, family, and football, a triad long espoused by older coaches as varied as Notre Dame's Knute Rockne, Tom Landry of the Dallas Cowboys, and Vince Lombardi of the Green Bay Packers. Faith, family, and football: Lombardi "means just what he says," observed his all-pro offensive guard, Jerry Kramer, "but sometimes I think he got his order confused." So did McCartney.

Little did he know that his Promise Keepers' concerns for spiritual morality and sexual "purity" were being undermined within his own family. Without his knowledge, a daughter became amorously involved and pregnant with Colorado's star quarterback, Sal Aunese, who tragically died of stomach cancer in 1989. Shortly thereafter, the daughter announced a second pregnancy with yet another of her father's athletes, defensive tackle Shannon Clavelle.

All the while McCartney's wife, Lyndi, struggled, lonely and depressed, isolated and susceptible to addictions. In 2000 she was diagnosed with emphysema and confined to life in a wheelchair hooked up to an oxygen mask. In these personal, familial matters, McCartney admitted candidly but in language stripped of the specifics, "I didn't get it done."

For a time, he continued to "get it done" brilliantly on the football field. In the season of 1994 his Buffaloes finished with an 11–1

record, ranking them third in the nation. They also produced a Heisman Trophy winner, Rashaan Salaam, who rushed for more than two thousand yards that year. With these notable achievements in hand, McCartney hung up his coach's whistle for the final time.

Eager to repair his family, he nonetheless accepted a full-time position as executive director of Promise Keepers, an assignment requiring much travel and frequent absence from home. By the mid-1990s, Promise Keepers claimed more than two million active members with eight regional offices and an annual budget of $96 million. In October 1997, more than a hundred thousand men turned out for a massive, highly publicized rally on the National Mall in Washington, D.C.

Having redirected his energy away from the pressure to win ball games, McCartney sought, with some success, to rekindle the intimacy at home that had withered under his professional preoccupations. He did that homework just in time. In March 2013, Lyndi McCartney died, leaving her coaching husband free to spread his evangelical message near and far.

An evangelical or fundamentalist gospel especially resonates in the Deep South, where it links up with revivalist means of persuasion. From 2000 to 2010, church attendance declined throughout the United States but dramatically increased in no fewer than eight southern states. In South Carolina alone, more

than two thousand new churches have been founded within the past fifteen years.

As southerners frequently define themselves by the team they cheer on Saturday and the church they attend on Sunday, their popular culture is filled with humorous riddles that wrap religion and sport (especially football) into a single package. Why did the architects give Texas Stadium a retractable roof? To provide God with a better view of Dallas Cowboys games. Who was an atheist in Alabama during the 1960s and 1970s? Someone who didn't believe in Crimson Tide coach Bear Bryant.

A recent poll by *USA Today* ranked the state of Tennessee as the nation's fourth-most religious state, making a campus organization, Volunteers for Christ, something more than simply a pun on the athletic teams' nickname. From Baptist and Methodist pulpits throughout the state, Jesus shed orange blood, certainly not Georgia Bulldog red or Kentucky blue. Several miles north of Knoxville, the First Methodist Church in Morristown once bade farewell to a popular music director by closing his final service with his favorite hymn. As he was an enthusiastic fan of the Vols, the congregation smiled knowingly as the organist played a raucous version of "Rocky Top" with her foot pedals.

These details are cheekily reported in Chad Gibbs's *God & Football: Faith and Fanaticism in the SEC*. Gibbs, a native Alabaman, grew up immersed in religious dogma and religious activities in Birmingham. He was born again and again and again, as he tells it. On a well-beaten southern path, church study

groups and summer youth camps prodded Gibbs momentarily to entertain the prospect of attending a denominational seminary.

Youthful dreams coincided with a monumental shift of football allegiance from the Crimson Tide to their hostile in-state rivals, Auburn's War Eagles. Comparing this about-face with St. Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus, Gibbs sought an answer to the question of why it seemed that football and God were "sharing a bunk bed." That quest sent him looking for people like himself, people who loved their team and at the same time loved God but were apparently more successful than he "at separating and prioritizing the two."

For an entire summer, Gibbs corresponded with churches and campus religious organizations around the Southeastern Conference, setting up autumn interviews with local religious leaders when he attended the home games of all twelve SEC schools. "Welcome to the American South," he began his account of those visits, "where God and football scrimmage daily for the people's hearts and minds."

Coaches oversee those scrimmages. Of the many Deep South coaches who douse athletic programs with religious gestures and pronouncements, the names of Les Miles at Louisiana State University and Mark Richt, formerly at the University of Georgia, frequently emerge. Even more visible is the scene at the University of Mississippi, where the Rebels' head football coach, Hugh Freeze, heartily supports his team's chaplain, John Powell, and "encourages" but does not require attendance at meetings

of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes. Freeze frequently uses Twitter to send out Bible verses to his players, plays gospel music during practice, and thinks it his Christian duty to inform his athletes how much he believes in Jesus. Scarcely are these activities calculated for mere show. As a reporter from the *Washington Post* once watched Ole Miss players filing into the campus's Manning Center for an FCA event, he noticed Freeze mouthing the words to a familiar old gospel hymn, "Jesus Paid It All."

An even more complicated drama has been regularly played out at Clemson University under the supervision of head football coaches Tommy Bowden and Dabo Swinney. Bowden's passion came naturally from his home, where his father, Bobby Bowden, capitalized on a highly successful coaching career at Florida State University to open doors to churches as well as locker rooms for his Christian message. "God put us on this earth to be messengers of His word," insisted the elder Bowden.

In traditional religious terms, Bobby Bowden considered himself "called to coach" but readily admitted that if he were told to stop talking about religious verities, he would have gone "underground" with his message. Far from adopting any kind of underground tactic, the Fellowship of Christian Athletes assumed a conservative Christian dimension when it created a Bobby Bowden Award to honor the college player who best represents the term "student athlete."

Unable to outdo his father, Tommy Bowden nonetheless walked in those big footprints. At Clemson from 1999 to 2008,

he kept a Bible on his desk and led team prayers not only before games but also when players were leaving campus for Christmas and Easter holidays. Occasionally his religious references came entwined with fundamentalist ideology. Bowden once called the team's attention to a colorful sunset as evidence that mere evolution was an insufficient explanation of God's handiwork. "Y'all can believe in evolution all you want," he curtly informed his players.

Bowden easily found ways to skirt around the laws requiring a separation of church and state. He initiated a "Church Day" arrangement for the university's state-owned buses to transport athletes each Sunday to churches in the Clemson area. Threatened with a lawsuit by the American Civil Liberties Union, he dispensed with the buses and used private cars instead. After all, he insisted, his purpose was primarily team unity rather than sectarian proselytizing. Athletes participated voluntarily, not under pressure from coaches, he claimed.

This common Deep South refrain—that athletes act voluntarily rather than under pressure from coaches to participate religiously—raises several questions, of course. An essential issue is the power imbalance of college players needing to stay on the good side of coaches who decide whether they play or ride the bench on Saturday. Many Clemson athletes, though, come to the university from a local culture already saturated with religious assumptions. In 2012 a wide receiver, DeAndre Hopkins, announced his conversion and chose to be baptized in a big tub of

water brought right onto the practice field while his teammates looked on.

That episode occurred under the watch of Bowden's successor, Dabo Swinney. His football program seemed much too "entangled with religion," protested a Wisconsin-based watchdog organization. One of their many concerns was Swinney's circumvention of university rules that called for team chaplains to be selected by the players. Disregarding that policy, Swinney personally handed the assignment to James Trapp, a campus director of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes whose office was conveniently located in the bowels of the football stadium.

Trapp brought a checkered past to the task. As a world-class sprinter and then for eleven years as a defensive back in the National Football League, he had been a hell-raiser on and off the field. According to one journalist, he was most at home with the devil-may-care Oakland Raiders: "He was among the league's nastiest players, one who wore a self-described animal scowl." Religious conversion helped to soften the nastiness and the scowl, but a medical diagnosis of leukemia threatened Trapp's life shortly before he returned to Clemson. Thanks to a stem cell transplant, he is a leukemia survivor.

At Clemson, Trapp wore not two hats but three: one for the Fellowship of Christian Athletes, another as the chaplain to the football team, and a third as a campus fundraiser for cancer research. His oft-repeated sermon to fellow fundraisers drew freely on his hard-won gridiron experience as well as a

newly won sense of Christian mission: "Instead of standing by, be aggressive. You can't play on the sidelines. You have to get on the field to play. It is important for cancer research, and they are doing some really great things."

Whether or not Clemson is doing "really great things" in its mixture of sport and evangelical religion is another question. Some 75 percent of all South Carolinians polled recently believe that Dabo Swinney is doing a commendable job at the helm of the football program. Even Tommy Bowden can be allowed a sigh of relief that religious controversy might perversely work to the benefit of God's kingdom in Death Valley: "There's not a mother in the Southeast whose antenna didn't go up when they heard that Clemson was too religious. It's a recruiting bonanza. It's funny how God works."

It is especially funny (strange) that this God-talk and these God-games swirled around the heads of Tommy Bowden and Dabo Swinney rather than on the shoulders of their in-state rival, Steve Spurrier, the recent head football coach at the University of South Carolina. Neither Bowden nor Swinney can claim, as could Spurrier, to be the son of a preacher man; nor can these wearers of Clemson orange claim to have been named intentionally after St. Stephen, the first Christian martyr.

Spurrier's father, the Reverend John Graham Spurrier, pastored almost a dozen Presbyterian churches throughout the South. For several years he settled in Johnson City, Tennessee, where he coached Steve's boyhood baseball team. On the first

day of practice, the Reverend Spurrier treated the boys to some heart-to-heart discussion. "How many of you believe it's not whether you win or lose," he asked, "but how you play the game?" Most all the boys raised their hands, but young Steve knew not to bite that bait. His father drilled home the point that if one is keeping score, then one plays to win. This competitive spirit stuck with Spurrier through a college career that saw him win the Heisman Trophy, survive ten years as a quarterback in the National Football League, and achieve a phenomenal win–loss record as coach at the University of Florida, Duke University, and the University of South Carolina.

Apparently the father's simple, uncomplicated faith also accompanied the son into adulthood. "He believed the Bible from the front to the back," Steve admiringly recalled his father's traditional mindset. "If the Bible said Jonah was in the belly of the whale for three days then you know what? Jonah was in the belly of the whale for three days. There was none of this stuff about how the story might have been exaggerated or interpreted differently over the years. My dad believed it exactly the way it was written. He kept things very simple."

Simple, yes. Conservative? Most certainly. Fundamentalist? Absolutely not. Spurrier's faith lacked the dogmatic edge and revivalistic imperatives that compose the fundamentalist package. More importantly, he also lacked the belief that God's gift of athletic and leadership skills had put him on a public podium to proclaim the Gospel to an attentive world. "My profession is

coaching," said Spurrier. "I leave the preaching to the ministers." Apparently this Preacher's Kid had heard enough preaching to last him a lifetime.

God is a gridiron guy, it seems. Although Steve Spurrier refused to play the preacher's game, most sermons and explicit religious intentions come from football rather than basketball or some other campus athletic quarters. At the head of a championship dynasty at UCLA, John Wooden espoused an ethical view of life, a view that undoubtedly originated in some sort of Protestant faith. But none of Wooden's biographers make much of the religious basis of his humane ways.

The same can be said of Wooden's highly successful Catholic counterpart, Mike Krzyzewski. Duke's championship coach proudly claims an immigrant youth in north Chicago, a youth in which attentive priests at an all-boy's Catholic prep school made lasting impressions for the good. Yet Krzyzewski will not be found fishing for Catholic converts among the Cameron Crazies.

Just a few miles from Duke, Dean Smith put an altogether different spin on the religion-and-sport game as it was played by his University of North Carolina Tarheels. During his thirty-six years at the helm, the Tarheels copped thirteen Atlantic Coast Conference titles, competed in eleven NCAA Final Fours, and won two national championships. Smith corrected the flaws and

honed the skills of players as diversely gifted as Larry Brown, Billy Cunningham, Charlie Scott, James Worthy, Sam Perkins, Mitch Kupchak, Walter Davis, Bobby Jones, Phil Ford, Rasheed Wallace, Vince Carter, and the incomparable Michael Jordan. At his retirement in 1997, Smith's 879 victories put him above all college coaches in the entire history of the game.

Not so public, his personal history holds the key to some of his more impressive professional moments. Both parents were progressive-minded public school teachers in Emporia, Kansas; both voiced impatience with the anti-evolutionist views that were as rampant in Kansas as in Tennessee in the aftermath of the interwar Scopes trial. Rational ideas about science and religion were one thing; racial integration in small-town Kansas was something else altogether. As coach of the local high school basketball team, Smith's father came under fire for playing too many African American athletes. Townsmen and the state athletic association threatened to have him fired. As Dean Smith later summarized his upbringing, his parents simply "believed in the human family."

That perspective stuck with him as he worked as assistant to Tarheels coach Frank McGuire in the late 1950s, prompting Smith in 1958 to become a charter member of a newly founded church in Chapel Hill, the Olin T. Binkley Memorial Baptist Church. A rarity among Southern Baptist churches of that era, Binkley Memorial aggressively promoted liberal thought and a racially integrated membership. The pastor, the Reverend

Robert Seymour, encouraged his parishioners to work on behalf of sensible, politically progressive public policies.

Parson and coach first collaborated in exerting pressure on the owners of Chapel Hill restaurants to open their doors to people of color. This project became easier after Smith became the Tarheels' head coach in 1961. Scarcely did the management of the Pines Restaurant, where the basketball team usually ate its meals, wish to risk the ire of the head coach. For lunch at the Pines, in 1966 Tarheels coaches took their first African American recruit, Charlie Scott, a young man destined to break the color barrier in the Atlantic Coast Conference.

Scott's vulnerability at games on the road once almost caused Smith to lose his customary poise. In Columbia, South Carolina, at the end of a hotly contested game against the University of South Carolina Gamecocks, an agitated fan called Scott a "big, black baboon." Enraged, the normally placid Smith threatened to fight, requiring his assistants to pull him away.

One of his players, George Karl (now an active NBA coach) recalls Coach Smith starting each practice with a thoughtful quote. Smith might well have stolen a page from the playbook of John Wooden, UCLA's Hall of Fame mentor whose players retained his "pyramid of success" maxims long after all the basketball techniques faded from memory. Most of Smith's meditative moments pertained to the ways and means of constructing a good life. "Every once in a while they were on basketball," says Karl, "but 90 percent of the time they were on civil rights. They

were on education. They were on religion. They were on the spirituality of life and on making the right decisions and going the right way."

Until Alzheimer's overtook him, Smith continued to hold his views of "the spirituality of life" in one hand and a determination to do the "right thing" in the other. A journalist for the *Nation* lauded him as "the most visible white antiracist of the last half-century." Fully supported by his pastor and friends at the Binkley Memorial church, over the years Smith also voiced opposition to the Vietnam War and registered his support for equal rights for gays as well as women. "I don't think it's anything but wanting to do the right thing," he explained.

Smith's views on capital punishment required more explanation, especially in North Carolina, a state that overwhelmingly assumed the legitimacy of the death penalty. In 2003 Smith, having long retired from coaching, joined a delegation in a visit to the office of North Carolina governor James Hunt pleading (unsuccessfully) for the life of a mentally ill prisoner on death row. In defense of his position, Smith called upon the teachings of his parents, his church, and his better self: "I don't condone any violence against any of God's children," he declared, "and that's why I am opposed to the death penalty."

Personable as well as principled, Dean Smith inspired both affection and admiration in his athletes. "He was more than a coach," says Michael Jordan, the greatest of all the Tarheels superstars. "He was my mentor, my teacher, my second father.

Coach was always there for me whenever I needed him and I loved him for it." Both on the scoreboard and well beyond it, Dean Smith skillfully played the game.

Admirers especially recalled his emphasis on giving credit to the player whose good pass led to a successful basket. Smith urged Tarheels scorers, in place of the chest-thumping their contemporaries frequently exhibited following dramatic fast breaks and give-and-go maneuvers, to instead honor assists with grateful fingers pointed toward the teammate who unselfishly set up the score. This gesture effectively replaced any pious pointing to the heavens.

CHAPTER 3

Scribes and Sportscasters

Prophetic Voices from the Press Box

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As outspoken athletes and coaches engage in quirky religious activities and colorful quips, broadcasters and sportswriters translate this information for public consumption. The press box brings its own bias to the equation. In recent years, its religious sympathies have been muted. If present, they are largely hidden. As a *New York Times* writer recently put it, an openly religious sportswriter is "as rare as eskimos in the Amazon." Likely as not, they are confined to an irritable discomfort surrounding postgame interviews with Tim Tebow and athletes like him who seem all too eager to proclaim their simple, puritanical faith.

Early sportscasters inhabited a radically different world. Their athletes were seldom so openly pious as athletes are today. Players and reporters shared a basic assumption that personal matters should be kept private, off-limits to the public eye. Dirty linen must not be hung out to dry for all to see because players and reporters wore similar underwear.

Or at first they did. Until the recent surge in professional athletes' salaries, no great economic difference separated players from reporters. Scribes and professional athletes alike were poorly paid for attending to the game they loved. For games away from home, teams and press corps traveled together. First on

trains and buses, then on planes, they freely conversed, forming friendships over games of cards or dice with postgame beers in hand.

For the early years of his career, Watson Spoelstra fit this profile as he filed daily reports for the sports pages of the *Detroit News*. To remove Spoelstra's bylines from the *News* between 1945 and 1973 would amount to an erasure of much of the postwar drama generated by Detroit's baseball Tigers, football Lions, ice hockey Red Wings, and basketball Pistons.

To his sports desk, Spoelstra brought a Dutch Calvinist heritage of hard work. He also brought impatience with the dogma and puritanical prohibitions of the Dutch Reformed Church. Growing up in Grand Rapids, Michigan, he chafed at the refusal of parents and church ministers to allow Sunday baseball. Four years at Hope College, a little liberal arts institution historically affiliated with the Reformed tradition, did little to dissolve Spoelstra's religious misgivings. For Hope, he played baseball and excelled in basketball. Graduating in 1932, he set his sights on becoming a hard-working, hard-drinking sportswriter.

In the early 1950s, Spoelstra and a Detroit Lions star quarterback, Bobby Layne, became drinking buddies. Despite Layne's having to play an NFL game the next day, they frequently hit the bars on Saturday nights. Sometime after midnight, Spoelstra

usually left Layne at the bar only to have the police summon him hours later for identification and a ride home for his drunken friend. That pattern became so commonplace that Spoelstra learned to lie fully dressed on his bed, his shoes still on, waiting for the police to call.

Several years later, Spoelstra received a more alarming, life-changing phone call informing him that his daughter, Ann, had suffered a brain hemorrhage. For several days she lay in a coma, near death, sending Spoelstra desperately to his knees. As he later recalled, he crudely bargained with God: "I've never paid much attention to you. My mother believed in you. You must be in this room, God. . . . I've got a deal for you: You do something about Ann and I'll let you do something with me."

Apparently God took the offer. The daughter miraculously recovered and the father miraculously kept his promise. He stopped drinking, cold turkey, leaving Bobby Layne to find another partner for late-night carousals. Spoelstra joined a Presbyterian church, the nearest he dared get to the Calvinism that agitated him so badly in his Dutch Reformed home. He attended numerous church study groups and Alcoholics Anonymous meetings. For a time, he even dabbled with the prospect of becoming a missionary.

Several professional honors came his way. In 1968 he served as president of the Baseball Writers Association of America, but he was still a man in search of a mission. Shortly after his retirement from the *Detroit News* in 1973, his future path became

clear. "When he came up with Baseball Chapel," says his son, Jon, "then it was off to the races."

He never looked back. Commissioner of Baseball Bowie Kuhn liked the idea of a collaborative effort between a Catholic commissioner and a born-again Protestant to provide a prayer, a reading from Scripture, and a brief homily for players at the ballpark prior to Sunday games. Kuhn allotted $5,000 for the effort; best of all, he gave it his official stamp of approval. Within three years all twenty-six Major League teams offered Baseball Chapel to players, their families, and ballpark staff. By 1978 the Chapel program expanded into the minor leagues.

None of this growth happened easily, of course. Retired from his newspaper job, Spoelstra worked for ten years or so on a shoestring budget sending out numerous personal notes, mailings, and newsletters. He pulled all the strings he had woven in locker rooms and press boxes during his long journalistic career. This personal touch especially served him well in his search for a player representative to be in charge of each team's Chapel program. Home run king Hank Aaron volunteered for the Milwaukee Brewers; sociable Reggie Jackson handled the chores for the Oakland A's.

When Watson Spoelstra died in 1999, Baseball Chapel employed eight full-time staff and about five hundred volunteers throughout North America. Son Jon Spoelstra worked in executive roles for several NBA teams; a grandson, Erik Spoelstra, recently coached superstars LeBron James, Dwayne Wade,

Chris Bosh, and Ray Allen to two NBA championships with the Miami Heat.

Spoelstra's career with the *Detroit News* coincided with the tenure of Detroit's play-by-play announcer, Ernie Harwell, the legendary "Voice of the Tigers." For almost half a century, Harwell annually called the attention of his listeners to the opening day of spring training with stately, memorable words from the old King James Version of the Song of Solomon 2:11–12:

> For lo, the winter is past,
> the rain is over and gone;
> the flowers appear on the earth;
> the time of the singing of birds is come,
> and the voice of the turtle is heard in our land.

This season-specific liturgy echoes the unique attractions of springtime baseball: a celebration of renewed life, a fresh start in things worthwhile, new hopes and dreams.

Scarcely did the public ritual of regularly presenting a Bible passage represent anything out of character for Harwell. A native Georgian, he imbibed abundant doses of both religious faith and baseball lore with his mother's milk. Before he attended Emory University, and long before he landed a sportswriter's job with the *Atlanta Constitution*, he was a youthful churchgoer and also a batboy for the Atlanta Crackers in the old Southern League.

In 1961 Harwell attended a Billy Graham crusade and came away reckoning himself "born again." Shortly thereafter he began working with Spoelstra to launch Baseball Chapel.

In addition to Harwell and Spoelstra, other journalists and sportscasters have frequently blended their religious beliefs with their media efforts. Another native southerner, Walter Lanier Barber (1908–92), grew up in Columbus, Mississippi, virtually on the buckle of the Bible Belt. His mother, an English teacher and school principal, reportedly sparked his interest in religious matters. Mississippi's pervasive religious culture consolidated that interest, sending him off to study at the University of Florida to prepare for an illustrious career as a play-by-play announcer for some four decades with the Cincinnati Reds, the Brooklyn Dodgers, and the New York Yankees. Especially with the Dodgers and Yankees, he became known simply as the "Ole Redhead," Red Barber.

His southern lilt and homely, colorful colloquialisms charmed Brooklyn and Manhattan listeners. In Red Barber, southern rural metaphors interacted comfortably with northern urban chic. Barber's baseball diamond was "a pea patch"; a loud on-the-field argument was a "rhubarb." When a team held a comfortable lead, he termed it "sitting in the catbird seat." In Barber's vivid imagination, a player dashed down the base path "like a bunny with his tail on fire."

These verbal outbursts frequently spiced up Barber's devotional meditations for Yankees gatherings in the 1960s, prior to the era of Baseball Chapel. Unfortunately, we have no evidence of what the Yankees' three resident hell-raisers, Mickey Mantle, Billy Martin, and Jim Bouton, thought of the Ole Redhead or his message. By the time of his retirement to Florida, Barber was an avid Episcopalian. As a "lay reader," he occasionally preached sermons in his Key Biscayne Episcopalian Church. Curiously, although he still demonstrated a full range of down-to-earth phrases and metaphors, his audience remembered most fondly his frequent citations from the subtle Lebanese philosopher and poet, Kahlil Gibran.

Another redhead in the press box, Walter Wellesley "Red" Smith (1905–1982), calls to mind a quite different strand of religious attention to sport. Smith came from northern, not southern, roots. He was Catholic, not Protestant; he was a sportswriter, not a radio or television man. At his typewriter, he struggled mightily to avoid the clichés that had become embedded in his profession. "Use the mother tongue with respect," he urged, "and don't gush." Once asked whether it was difficult to write a daily column, Smith replied with a priceless deadpan line: "Why no. You simply sit down at the typewriter, open a vein, and bleed." He bled to good effect, becoming the first sportswriter to win a Pulitzer Prize for his commentary.

To Red Smith's credit, he courageously changed his mind on athletes when the evidence called for it. For example, he initially

joined a host of other sportswriters in expressing revulsion toward the young Muhammad Ali, whose brash cockiness and change of name (from Cassius Clay) sent shudders through the press box. In 1967, when Ali refused to be inducted into the U.S. Army, Smith dismissed him for becoming "as sorry a spectacle as those unwashed punks who picket and demonstrate against the war." Student unrest continued while the Vietnam War dragged on, however, causing Smith to soften his views. After Ali's famous "Thrilla in Manila" victory over Joe Frazier in 1975, Smith announced over National Public Radio that he considered Ali not only a great fighter but a great man as well.

Asked to explain his changed perspective, Smith noted that he had "grown more liberal as I've grown older." His further explanation amounts to a liberal credo: "I have become more convinced that there is room for improvement in the world."

Red Smith attended Notre Dame in the golden 1920s era of Knute Rockne's Fighting Irish. In 1927, the year Smith graduated, the Irish won the mythic national championship with a record of 7–1–1. Despite the active presence of nearby WASP bigots in the Ku Klux Klan, it was a good time and place to be a Catholic.

This is especially true if one was thinking toward a career in sports journalism. Rockne attracted an impressive string of student journalism majors and shaped them into virtual cheerleaders for Notre Dame football. One of his earliest recruits, Arch

Ward, came from rural Iowa. In Dubuque he attended a parochial prep school where Catholic priests attempted to enlist him into the priesthood. He resisted that pressure but devoured the works of Kipling, Tennyson, and Longfellow, literature that lent itself to a romantic, chivalrous vision of humanity as a noble creation of God. Being small of stature and athletically incompetent, Ward idealized brawny, gifted athletes. As his biographer framed the issue, "Archie believed without a smidgen of hesitation or doubt in sports as the ideal expression of the noble virtues of manhood."

He and the heavily masculine, all-male Notre Dame were made for each other. In 1919 he arrived at South Bend highly recommended to Rockne by Gus Dorais, Rockne's old teammate who quarterbacked the Fighting Irish when they dramatically upset Army in 1913. Dorais's brief coaching stint at Dubuque (now Loras) College had given him firsthand knowledge of Ward's journalistic skills. Support from Dorais and Rockne got Ward into Notre Dame, making his "special student" status regarding tuition, room, and board only slightly less attractive than the arrangements made for football players on full-ride scholarships.

Although Ward worked with Rockne for a mere two years, he seized the opportunity to tie Notre Dame closely to the rapidly enlarging Catholic population of Chicago. In 1925 he joined the editorial staff of the *Chicago Tribune*, whose circulation figures of 658,000 dailies and more than a million Sunday sales made it

the most profitable newspaper in the nation. Controversy sold newspapers, of course, and Chicago had sports controversies galore.

Coverage of the local Black Sox scandal of 1919 (when seven members of the White Sox were accused of throwing the World Series to the Cincinnati Reds) and the second Tunney-Dempsey fight in 1926 (that included the famous "long count" when Dempsey's refusal to go to a neutral corner gave Tunney time to recover from a knockdown) kept the *Tribune* at the top of the journalistic heap.

In 1930 Ward became the sports editor at the *Tribune*, a position that enabled him to become the prime sponsor of several important sporting events. In 1933 he proposed and helped organize Major League Baseball's initial All-Star Game in conjunction with the world's fair scheduled that year at Comiskey Park. The game pitted the outstanding players from the American and National leagues against each other. Spurred by Babe Ruth's home run (the first in All-Star Game history) in the bottom of the third inning, the American League won, 4–2.

This game was originally intended as a one-time event, but its extravagant success (47,595 paying customers in the depths of the Depression) made it an annual matchup between the two major leagues. A writer for the *Sporting News* can be forgiven the misplaced optimism that the All-Star Game would become an even greater attraction than the World Series because it provided "for the first time, a test of the best talent in each major league."

Arch Ward's Catholic principles inspired him to douse his professional activities with charitable (if not holy) water. From the profits of the first Major League All-Star Game, about $45,000 went to the fund for needy retired players.

Another brainchild with Catholic Charities written all over it was Ward's 1934 creation, the College All-Star Game. This preseason gridiron counterpart to baseball's midseason All-Star Game called for the best of all the recently graduated college seniors to compete against the local champions of the NFL, the Chicago Bears. In truth, by 1934 the NFL had been in existence for only fourteen years. It had stumbled along, unstable and largely unprofitable, certainly not widely popular like the college game. If anything, this first College All-Star Game showcased the professionals who most needed good publicity.

Officially called the Chicago Charities College All-Star Game, this initial event at Soldier Field attracted almost eighty thousand spectators, nearly three times the number of fans who had turned out to watch the Bears defeat the New York Giants for the 1933 NFL championship. Despite the efforts of pro superstars Bronko Nagurski and Harold "Red" Grange on the Bears' squad, the game ended in a disappointing 0–0 tie. From 1934 to 1974, this unlikely College All-Star Game survived, much to the benefit of the professional game.

Three religious charities (Jewish, Catholic, and Protestant) received checks of $7,000 each from this first College All-Star outing, prompting a Catholic prelate to thank Arch Ward for "the

able manner in which this event was handled by you and your assistants, which enabled you to obtain such splendid returns in such difficult times and circumstances." Yet the College All-Star Game was merely one of many sporting ventures that Ward and the *Chicago Tribune* eagerly supported, all with the blessings of Chicago's ecclesiastical hierarchy.

Under a double whammy of Catholic piety and energetic journalism, amateur boxing thrived in Chicago. Shortly before the arrival of Arch Ward, in 1923 the *Chicago Tribune* staged a citywide tournament to test old Illinois state bans on boxing. Winners received a miniature gold glove for their efforts, thus the name "Golden Gloves." At the outset, Catholic charities reaped the benefits of pugilistic competition. From this first tournament, some $6,000 went into a fund to aid disabled veterans of World War I.

At that time, the *Tribune* owned the *New York Daily News*, whose sports editor, Paul Gallico, also eagerly promoted amateur boxing as a corrective to the corrupt, brutally dangerous enterprise of professional prizefighting in the interwar era. Golden Gloves officials required physical exams and thorough prefight training programs for each competitor as well as carefully monitored matchups to avoid mismatches of size, ability, and experience. For five days in March 1928, Chicago's Golden Gloves champions hosted New York City's champs in a much-publicized event that packed the rafters of the Chicago Coliseum. Over the coming years, that "Tournament of Champions" would

produce dozens of professional titleholders, including Joe Louis, Muhammad Ali, and Sugar Ray Leonard.

Whereas Arch Ward expressed his religious principles in practical promotional terms, sportswriter Grantland Rice (1880–1954) voiced his values through an imaginative, poetic style of reportage. Rice was born in Murfreesboro, Tennessee, into an old southern family whose Alabama roots included a Confederate general. In his Methodist and Episcopalian youth, Rice absorbed the metaphors and liturgical cadence of biblical language; at a private boys' school and then at Vanderbilt University, he played football and baseball while immersing himself in Greek and Roman classics and in Shakespeare, Keats, Shelley, Carlyle, and Kipling. "Verse and sport together make up the menu perfect, the main factor in both, is one of the main factors in life itself," Rice once wrote. "For without rhythm, there is a sudden snarl or tangle."

Rice worked for rhythm in his prose. No simple description would do, nor did he ever indulge in statistical evidence at the exclusion of flesh-and-blood drama imaginatively framed. Instead, he frequently called on his acquaintance with religious history and Holy Writ for memorable images. In 1924, Notre Dame's romp over Army inspired Rice to concoct the most famous lead line in the entire history of sports journalism: "Outlined against a blue-gray October sky, the Four Horsemen

rode again," wrote Rice. "In dramatic lore they are known as Famine, Pestilence, Destruction and Death. These are only aliases. Their real names are Stuhldreher, Miller, Crowley and Layden." Granted a kind of immortality by Grantland Rice, forever afterward the Four Horsemen would enjoy instant recognition.

Death squats on the backside of immortality, and death was a constant theme for Rice. In 1948 he framed Babe Ruth's death with a classic baseball reference prior to the pervasive use of electric lights at the ballpark:

> Game called by darkness—let the curtain fall.
> No more remembered thunder sweeps the field.
> No more the ancient echoes hear the call
> To one who wore so well both sword and shield.
> The Big Guy's left us with the night to face,
> And there is no one who can take his place.

The theme of death, of course, stirred classical as well as Christian allusions in Rice. Often he referred to Charon, the boatman in ancient mythology who ferried dead souls across the River Styx. "Charon—God guide your boat—on to the journey's end," Rice wrote with a mixture of classical and Christian mythologies on the death of his friend, sportswriter Ring Lardner:

For it carries a friend.
One who has given the world
Drama and wit and mirth—
One who has kept unfurled
The flag of a cleaner earth.

From his early days on the sports desk of the *Nashville Tennessean*, Rice displayed a whimsical style that refused to rest easily with literal prose. He could well have expounded concretely on the pleasures and moral effects of baseball. Instead, in "The Fan's Revery," he shamelessly employed age-old religious rhetoric regarding the pearly gates, golden stairs, angels, heaven "up there," the River Styx, and "beyond the skies." Rice wrapped all these religious references around an activity as commonplace as going to a baseball game:

When I have finished up my shift upon this world below
When they have borne me to my rest with music sad and slow—
Have reached the Pearly Gates—have climbed the Golden Stair—
I wonder if I'll get a chance to see a ball game there?

I don't mean any Angel game where everybody's good—
I wanter see the two teams meet and fight it out for blood—
And when the umpire hands us one that puts us on the blink—
I wanter rise up in the stands and tell him what I think.

I wanter take my same old place on Rooter's Row up there—
To help the other fellers put the pitcher in the air—
To holler, "Slide, you lobster, slide" and at each dumb play, make
Some few remarks that I'm afraid might not exactly take.

I'd like to go to heaven and yet it brings me tears
To think I'll never see a game through many million years—
The six months rest from fall to spring seems awful long to me—
So tell me then how I could last through an eternity?

When I have been "called out" below—my time "at bat" is done—
When I "have slid across" the Styx—"have scored my final run"
If I but knew beyond the skies I still could be a "fan"—
Sometimes I have a hunch that I would be a better man.

As echoes of Kipling's "If" resonate around the idea of becoming "a better man," Grantland Rice stands memorably unique, although much of his doggerel now sounds shop-worn and many of his views now seem obsolete. None of his pronouncements have suffered so severely as his oft-quoted little sermon in verse:

For when the one Great Scorer comes
To mark against your name,
He writes—not that you won or lost—
But how you played the Game.

How you played the game? Given the prophetic chorus of Granny Rice and his comrades in the press box on behalf of the games and the athletes they loved, the Great Scorer might well choose to consider how they portrayed, protected, and promoted the game.

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A Concluding Postscript

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Shortly before Grantland Rice crossed the River Styx in 1954, he momentarily left his typewriter at home for a brief visit to the gothic Cathedral of St. John the Divine at 1047 Amsterdam Avenue on the Upper West Side of New York City. Still being completed as a monumental center of Episcopalian life in North America, St. John the Divine was the largest religious structure on the continent, the third largest in the world. Yet Grantland Rice approached the place with nostalgia and affection, not awe. Years earlier he made a huge investment there. To Bishop William Thomas Manning, Rice gave permission for his name to be used to entice affluent sports-minded New York friends to contribute funds for the construction of a special chapel in the cathedral.

Imaginative stained-glass windows gave the chapel a unique character. In days of old, stained-glass windows had always featured prophets, apostles, saints, and other holy folk engaged in the work of the church. The architects of St. John the Divine produced a radically different scene animated by some thirty to forty athletes dressed in bright red, blue, and gold uniforms. In that "sports bay window," boxers, golfers, tennis players, shortstops, fullbacks, bowlers, and basketball players happily cavort

for all the world to watch. As Bishop Manning promised, the sports chapel became a "visible and beautiful symbol to tell all who enter, not only that the Church does not frown on sport but that the Church sympathizes with it, encourages it and rejoices in it."

The idea for a cathedral chapel dedicated to athletics apparently originated with Bishop Manning's daughter, Elizabeth. In 1924 she attended the Summer Olympics in Paris and returned home favorably impressed with the enthusiasm and wholesome atmosphere engendered by athletic competition. Her positive report confirmed her father's own affirmation of sport, views that he frequently announced in several public skirmishes with conservative defenders of sports-free Sundays in the 1920s. Elizabeth's rave review of the Paris games coincided with Bishop Manning's brainstorming sessions with the architects for St. John the Divine.

History sometimes moves by coincidence, not in cause-and-effect patterns. St. John's sports bay window is distantly related to the same Olympics that inspired *Chariots of Fire*. From Eric Liddell to Shelly Pennefather and Tim Tebow, and from Steve Spurrier and Dean Smith to Sam Mussabini, athletes and coaches come and go negotiating various religious aspects of their athletic commitments. At best, reporters and commentators lend clarity as well as charity to the enterprise.

Arguably, *passion* is the one common thread that runs through all our religious and athletic endeavors. Shelly Pennefather's

privately cloistered life of prayer and Tim Tebow's strong public assertions share an intense, passionate commitment of body and soul. In *Chariots of Fire*, when professional coach Mussabini hears that his pupil, Harold Abrahams, has won his race, Mussabini whoops with excitement and then outrageously rams a fist through his straw bowler hat. When it came time to replace the hat, he, like St. Paul, did not bother to count the cost.

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